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**Conjunto Clash: Competition and Sustainability in 21st-Century
Cultural Heritage Management**

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Cultural Heritage Management**

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Report

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Abstract

Conjunto Clash: Competition and Sustainability in 21st-Century Cultural Heritage Management

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Scholar Dan Margolies has noted the growing presence of music initiatives in the Texas-Mexican *conjunto* community that conform to the framework of “cultural sustainability,” as defined by ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon (Margolies 2011: 30). Titon’s model “decenters the top-down discourse by cultural heritage experts, and instead ... repositions cultural workers collaboratively” (Titon 2009: 703). One program identified by Margolies as culturally sustainable is the Big Squeeze statewide youth accordion contest (Margolies 2015). The Big Squeeze attempts to promote the many accordion traditions of Texas by showcasing talented young performers. In practice, the event conforms to a co-operative mode of cultural heritage management in that it stages auditions throughout the state, often in underserved or rural areas, and collaborates extensively with local musicians, teachers, cultural workers, and business owners. The Big Squeeze has also created professional opportunities for its winners. On the other hand, many issues emerge as a result of the event’s sustainable structure. In the case of conjunto, the element of competition is at constant odds with the music’s resonance as a symbol of working-class solidarity among Mexican-Americans. More broadly, competition can have the effect of

discouraging young participants from playing. Other problems arise when attempting to address the needs of multiple music communities through one framework. Ultimately, the lessons from the Big Squeeze build upon Titon's scholarship by identifying and attempting to create solutions for unforeseen issues presented by culturally sustainable heritage efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a cool morning in Los Fresnos, a small town located outside the city of Brownsville, Texas, about 20 miles from the US. Mexico border. The streets are quiet except for the sound of accordions drifting out from the local high school. Today, auditions begin for the Big Squeeze youth accordion contest, and kids from across South Texas have gathered to try to earn a spot at the finals in Austin later this year. Accordionists are huddled in every corner of the school, practicing their huapangos, polkas, and waltzes in order to impress the judges. Many of the contestants come from Los Fresnos High school, an institution that boasts its own conjunto program of about 40 students. The program's founder and teacher, Juan Longoria Jr., is himself a former Big Squeeze champion of 2007. His family is steeped in conjunto tradition. His father, Juan Longoria Sr., is a well-known accordionist in South Texas, having performed for decades with Conjunto Halcón, and his brother, Federico "Lico" Longoria, plays bajo sexto and helps with programming concerts. Standing next to Longoria Jr. is Cristina Ballí, director of traditional arts non-profit Texas Folklife, the producers of the event. Ballí is a South Texas native. She has strong ties to the conjunto scene as a result of a former role as director of the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center in San Benito, Texas. I am setting up the Texas Folklife merchandise table in my capacity as Social Media and Marketing Director for the organization. As I lay out DVDs, CDs, bumper stickers, and shirts, I am also documenting the competition. I am joined by Iliana Vásquez, another UT graduate student in the department of Mexican American Studies who is writing a master's thesis on conjunto pioneer Esteban Jordan. As the auditorium fills up with friends and family of the

contestants, everyone clears the stage. A wave of microphone feedback rolls through the auditorium, letting the audience know the event is about to begin. Ballí walks on stage, and says, “Hello, and welcome to the Los Fresnos edition of the Big Squeeze youth accordion showcase.”

The scene above provides a snapshot of the interactions between non-profit organizations, community members, researchers, and local musicians in a collaborative effort in support of what scholar Jeff Todd Titon describes as “musical sustainability.” The term “sustainable” is closely associated with the fields of economics and ecology and refers to an awareness that growth of any sort is impossible to perpetuate indefinitely, and also acknowledges the value of diversity. Applied to cultural heritage management and music, sustainability efforts promote diverse music-cultural landscapes in cooperation with local communities. This essay explains how Texas Folklife self-consciously fashioned the Big Squeeze to conform to a sustainability model, resulting in a program that generates media exposure and professional opportunities for local partners and participants. It has also created new concerns unanticipated by the sustainability model. Competition stands out among such issues, as frustrated aspirations, feelings of personal inadequacy, and critical judgments of particular performances proliferate in the working-class communities participating in the event. An aesthetic of competition sharply contrasts with *conjunto*’s long-established practice of egalitarian, community-based performances, not to mention its symbolic resonance as a form of working-class resistance to Anglo-American culture (Peña 1985). More broadly, the Big Squeeze attempts to address the needs of multiple music communities (polka, Cajun/zydeco, and *conjunto* players) in one tournament, creating

tensions between distinct traditions, as the relatively large number of *conjunto* participants tends to overshadow those from other styles.

Cultural sustainability represents a growing area of focus for policy makers and scholars. In 2006, the annual meeting of the Society of Ethnomusicology organized a panel on the topic of music and sustainability, featuring presentations by scholars Thomas Turino, Jeff Todd Titon, and Mark DeWitt. Related institutions such as the Smithsonian Center for Cultural Folklife and Cultural Heritage have held similar events.¹ Growing interest in cultural sustainability seems to be part of the broader expansion of scholarship on the arts that seeks ways to collaborate with local communities, conduct work that benefits them in tangible ways, and recognizes the linkages between culture and broader social initiatives. In *Cultural Expediency: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*, George Yúdice argues that political and other institutions increasingly view culture as a resource to be utilized as a means of effective progressive social change. Cultural managers and organizations have become advocates in the political economy as they mediate between communities and tradition-bearers.

Current scholarship on music and sustainability has largely been celebratory in tone, focusing on the model's applicability to musical pedagogy (Turino 2009, Brunt and Johnson 2013) or on successful interventionist efforts of the past (Faux 2009, Wilcken 2009, De Witt 2009). Nevertheless, Titon writes, "A comparative study of traditional arts and cultural agencies' effects on musical renewals, revivals, and revitalizations would be most helpful to policy makers, and even more to the scholar-practitioners within those

¹ E.g., Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. "Symposium: Cultural Sustainability in the Age of Globalization." Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. <http://www.folklife.si.edu/news-and-events/symposium-cultural-sustainability-in-the-age-of-globalization> (accessed May 5, 2016).

musical cultures” (Titon 2009:12). My article contributes to such an effort by providing a case study of one traditional arts program consciously shaped by Titon’s sustainability model. My analysis emphasizes the need to address the uneven social, financial, and institutional exchanges between cultural heritage managers and communities engaged in sustainability efforts. I advocate a revision of the model’s naturalistic language through the incorporation of post-colonial and post-structural critiques taken from the social sciences, specifically with respect to issues of positionality, multivocality, and power dynamics. The bulk of my research was conducted in a dual capacity as graduate student for the University of Texas at Austin and an employee of Texas Folklife. I attended showcases at La Joya High School, Los Fresnos High School, Conjunto Heritage Taller in San Antonio, and the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, and participated in administering the events, creating social media content for Texas Folklife, and documenting the events.

HISTORY OF THE BIG SQUEEZE CONTEST

Founded in 1985 by folklorists Pat Jasper, Kay Turner, and Elizabeth Peterson, Texas Folklife is a non-profit organization with the goal of “preserving and promoting the traditional arts of the Lone Star State.” In its 31 years of operation, Texas Folklife has facilitated master-student apprenticeships, gallery art shows, CD releases, and many other programs, but is most well-known for its accordion events. Its flagship program, the annual Accordion Kings and Queens Concert (originally named Accordion Kings) has been the NGO’s longest-running of these and has featured illustrious names in conjunto-, zydeco-, and polka-based accordion performance such as Flaco Jiménez, Los Texmaniacs, Brave Combo, and Esteban Jordan. In 2007, former Texas Folklife director Nancy Bless founded

the Big Squeeze youth accordion contest as a complement to the Accordion Kings and Queens concert. The Big Squeeze originally invited all players under the age of 28 to compete for one prize, regardless of performance style. In 2009, the age limit was lowered to 21, where it has remained ever since. Prizes have varied over the years, but have usually involved some combination of cash, a new accordion, studio recording time, and/or the opportunity to play in the Accordion Kings and Queens concert.

The Big Squeeze did not attract many contestants in its first few years of existence, primarily because the application process (consisting of e-mailing mp3 recordings of performances) proved difficult for many individuals interested in participating. Cristina Ballí explains, “You’d think that all kids know everything about digital media nowadays. But there is a digital divide with poor communities, and that would be the case here” (Ballí 2015). Upon Bless’ departure from Texas Folklife in 2009, incoming director Cristina Ballí established an innovative strategy to find contestants. Ballí had strong connections to the South Texas *conjunto* community, having spent the last five years working at the Narciso Martínez Cultural Arts Center in San Benito, Texas, another non-profit involved in the presentation/preservation of Mexican-American culture. She knew that in order to find contestants, the organization would have to seek them out in their own neighborhoods. This realization eventually led her to establish a touring showcase system in which the organization traveled to rural locations in Texas and staged auditions at community centers, high schools, and music workshops in order to ensure easy access for participants. In this way the program witnessed a significant enrollment spike in 2010, drawing 28 contestants, more than doubling the entries from the year before. Around that time scholar Dan Margolies became involved with the organization and noticed that the heritage efforts at

work within the *conjunto* community fit within Jeff Titon's "sustainability" model (Margolies 2011). Increasingly, Margolies collaborated with the organization, becoming a key figure in the creation of both the Festival of Texas Fiddling and Texas Polka Symposium; as late as 2015 he had plans to write a book with Ballí about the *conjunto* scene and its relation to Titon's sustainability model.²

CONJUNTO AND THE BIG SQUEEZE AS SUSTAINABLE CULTURE

The concept of sustainable development originates in environmental policy and has been subsequently applied to economic, social, and cultural issues. It was introduced in the Brundtland Report of 1987, an environmental evaluation funded by the United Nations Commission on Environment and World Development. The document defined sustainability as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."³ Cultural policy makers began using the concept in the mid 1990's; it appears in the language of the World Commission on Culture's document "Our Creative Diversity" (1995)⁴ helped lead to its adoption, along with the European Council's report "In from the Margins: A Contribution to the Debate on Culture and Development in Europe"⁵ (1997), and UNESCO's "Convention for the

² Ballí's departure from Texas Folklife in 2016 put the book on indefinite hiatus.

³ Brundtland, Gro. "Our Common Future." Brundtland Report. <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2016).

⁴ Office of the World Commission on Culture and Development. "Our Creative Diversity." World Commission on Culture. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001055/105586e.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2016).

⁵ European Council. "In from the Margins: A Contribution to the Debate on Culture and Development in Europe." European Council. (accessed May 5, 2016). https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/resources/Publications/InFromTheMargins_EN.pdf (accessed May 5, 2016).

Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage”⁶ (2003). Scholarship discussing cultural sustainability has addressed many topics, everything from comparative literature (Kadir 2011), to preservations of ancient Tibetan culture, to heritage tourism (MacBeth 2005, Chiabai, Lombardi, and Paskaleva 2013, Schroeder 2015). Much of it, though, deals with urban planning initiatives that minimize environmental damage, maximize individual well-being, and are economically viable (Memmot 2015, Zhang 2013, Tong 2013, Chiu 2004). Some scholars consider cultural sustainability to be interchangeable with (or at least linked to) social sustainability. Writings using the term social sustainability reflect a similar focus on ideal urban planning (e.g., Stren and Polèse 2000, Manzi 2010, Bramley, Brown, and Dempsey 2012). In their review of cultural sustainability literature, scholars Inger Birkeland and Katriina Soini note the divergent meanings of the topic, explaining, “we have seen that under the umbrella of cultural sustainability, there is a range of representations of political ideologies, from conservatism to liberalism to communitarianism and environmentalism that express solutions to various social and environmental problems related to sustainable development” (Inger and Soini 2012:219). The authors conclude that the concept is “at an early stage in its conceptual evolution” (Inger and Soini 2012: 219) and “has remained under-emphasized and under-theorized,”(Inger and Soini 2012: 214), though they do identify prominent themes in the scholarship such as the importance of locality, of a diversity of cultural expression, of the economic viability of any given initiative, and of the eco-cultural civilization.

⁶ UNESCO. “Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” UNESCO. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention> (accessed May 5, 2016).

Jeff Titon applied four of the core principles of ecological sustainability to cultural heritage management in crafting what he suggested would be an ideal model for cultural broker-musical community interactions. They are “diversity, limits to growth, connectedness, and stewardship” (Titon 2009:702). Influenced by Alan Lomax’s writings on “cultural equity,” Titon uses the concept of “diversity” to stress that all musical traditions should be perpetuated and that they “contribute, actually and potentially, to the adaptational capabilities of humankind” (Titon 2009: 704). The principle of “limits to growth” acknowledges that resources for renewing musical communities are finite, and, therefore, that the continuous growth of a given musical community is neither desirable nor feasible. “Connectedness” underscores that musical cultures should interact with each other and suggests activists recognize that efforts to preserve one performance tradition may affect another. “Stewardship” includes “managing the cultural soil... [alongside] culture bearers and community scholars” to help them care for musical traditions in their community contexts (Titon 2009:707). Titon argues that cultural preservationist efforts have too often overlooked these principles, frequently with negative consequences, and provides examples of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage mandates that, in designating certain expressions as unique and privileged, have the undesired effect of altering the championed practices as well as marginalizing others. For example, in 2003 UNESCO proclaimed Chinese *qin*, a style of music performed on the *guqin*, a seven-stringed zither, to be a masterpiece of Intangible Cultural Heritage. UNESCO’s proclamation championed the music as an “elite art form, practised by noblemen and

scholars in intimate settings, and ... therefore never intended for public performance.”⁷ Ironically, scholar Bell Yung’s publications on the *qin* reveal that, since the UNESCO proclamation, private performances on the instrument have almost entirely disappeared in favor of a more virtuosic presentational form of the music popularized by growing public interest resulting from its ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) designation (Titon 2009: 128). To avoid such outcomes, Titon imagines an approach that “de-centers the top-down discourse of resource management” and instead “repositions workers collaboratively... to help the musical community maintain and improve the conditions under which their expressive culture may flourish” (Titon 2010: 703).

Using Titon’s theorization of sustainability as a framework, Daniel Margolies writes, “*conjunto* music culture in Texas is the model of the kind of musicultural ecosystem than can best serve regional, vernacular musics in the current era of intense marketplace competition and cultural homogenization” (Margolies 2015). Margolies identifies a “diverse array of committed individual musicians, activists, and others in the community” who participate actively in festivals, apprenticeship programs, and other organizations (Margolies 2015). To the list the author adds Texas Folklife, an institution he notes “has been a key participant... since its start in programs like the Big Squeeze, Accordion Kings and Queens” (Margolies 2015). Margolies does not go into detail as to why the Big Squeeze contest should be considered a sustainable musical program, so for the purposes of this essay, I examine the extent to which the Big Squeeze fits into Titon’s framework.

⁷ UNESCO. “*Gugin* and its Music.” UNESCO. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/gugin-and-its-music-00061> (accessed May 5, 2016).

With regards to diversity, the Big Squeeze has embraced all forms of accordion expression in Texas and has attempted (with mixed results) to create space for each style without neglecting others. When the program began in 2008, a panel of judges selected one winner from among all contestants. An overwhelming percentage of applicants were *conjunto* players, and they tended to have a much higher level of technical skill because of the aforementioned community and mentorship networks. Event organizers recognized that other performers were being overshadowed as a result and, in 2014, decided to split the competition into three different categories: *conjunto*, polka, and Cajun/zydeco. A winner was selected from each style as a way to mediate the overwhelming popularity of *conjunto* and encourage participation from Cajun/zydeco and polka contestants. The decision created greater visibility for alternate styles and affirmed the sustainability goal of “cultural equity” among musical expressions, regardless of their marginal status. It also highlighted variety rather than monolithic homogeneity.

The Big Squeeze’s regional focus highlights the themes of “limits to growth” and “connectedness,” particularly in the case of *conjunto*. The competition attracts contestants exclusively from Texas. Moreover, it holds showcases in rural and underserved communities with the goal of seeking out players already participating in the style, rather than using the competition to spread traditions to other regions. These events allow the Big Squeeze to find some of the most gifted players in the state while simultaneously providing a space for its affiliate publics to convene, creating what Robert Putnam calls a form of “social capital,” defined as “social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness” (cited in De Witt 2009: 22). In Los Fresnos and La Joya, the organization partners with local *conjunto* high school ensembles. Such auditions are often followed by

a concert involving a performance by school ensembles, and sometimes from other schools in the Rio Grande Valley. At the San Antonio auditions, Texas Folklife partners with Conjunto Heritage Taller, a workshop connected to the Gallista folk art gallery that offers music lessons on button accordion and *bajo sexto*. Like the showcases held at South Texas high schools, the San Antonio event also culminates in a concert that is not specifically connected to the auditions. In 2015, Conjunto Heritage Taller instructor Lorenzo Martínez and his cousin, community activist and musician Juan Tejada, performed a set of traditional *conjunto* songs after the auditions. During his set, many of the older attendees began dancing, apparently reclaiming the tradition's roots in a participatory performance. By allowing its partners to stretch the Big Squeeze beyond the competitive model, Texas Folklife has the potential to address the diverse needs and desires of the individuals with whom it works, emphasizing the themes of connectedness and inclusiveness.

In many ways, the Big Squeeze has created professional opportunities for its participants and partners that fall within the category of “cultural stewardship.” The auditions and final rounds of competition generate a significant amount of press coverage for participants and the styles in which they perform. This is particularly impactful for polka and Cajun/zydeco performers whose music typically generates little media interest nationally or regionally. On an individual level, winners of the Big Squeeze contest receive prizes, as mentioned. Winning or being a finalist in the event also tends to generate professional opportunities for accordionists, and Texas Folklife has established a touring roster of Big Squeeze winners and finalists to respond to external requests for performance and help manage performers' careers. Longoria Jr. notes how prestigious winning the event is perceived to be locally, acknowledging that it may have played a role in allowing him to

start the *conjunto* ensemble in the high school, which at the time was a controversial idea. In a personal interview, Longoria states, “I know the competition has helped me get recognized... It’s been very good to me.” But for every successful Big Squeeze winner, there are dozens of participants who must deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of not advancing, suggesting a significant conflict between the local, sustainable networks and competitive programming.

COMPETITION AND SUSTAINABILITY

Cristina Balli walks on stage to announce the next contestant. We learn that he is another student from Los Fresnos High School’s conjunto ensemble and that he will be performing a huapango. He walks on stage dressed (like many others) in his finest ranchero clothing: cowboy hat, pearl snap cowboy shirt, jeans, and boots. Federico Longoria, accompanying the musician on bajo sexto, counts off the tune and they begin playing. The student’s skill and precision is noticeable from the beginning, and he smiles a wide, confident grin as he executes the technical flurries of notes in the piece. About halfway through, he begins dancing to the huapango, tapping out the syncopations with the heels of his boots to the delight of the crowd. Gritos, whistles, and applause nearly drown out the performance, but he is not through yet. At a planned break in the accordion playing, in which Longoria maintains the beat, the contestant swings the accordion behind his back, bends over, and begins playing a technically difficult passage while continuing to dance. The response is enormous. More gritos. More applause. As he takes his final bow, it seems all but assured that he will be at the finals.

But the contestant described above is not selected, nor are any of the other students from Los Fresnos High School in 2015. The scenario raises questions about the value of individually judging youth musicians, the criteria used to do so, the relation of such criteria to those of local communities, and more broadly the methods through which one evaluates excellence in styles of music that have little history of being formally, qualitatively measured. Part two of this essay attempts to address these questions and provide possible solutions to the issues facing the Big Squeeze youth accordion contest and modifications to the sustainability model. Specifically, I suggest abandoning the tournament structure and imagining a form of sustainability that operates with a heightened level of sensitivity to the social and economic stratification that mediates interactions between communities and cultural heritage managers.

The Big Squeeze's competitive framework is influenced by youth music contests throughout the state of Texas, specifically fiddling and mariachi competitions, but with several key differences related to issues of ethnic identification, class, and evaluative metrics. Texas contest fiddling features a highly virtuosic repertoire developed specifically for the tournament structure. Samuel Bayard, a folklorist and expert on Anglo-American fiddling styles, notes that performance and repertoire in contest fiddling has moved "toward constantly greater uniformization and standardization" (cited in Goertzen 1996: 352). Scholar Chris Goertzen echoes this, explaining that judges tend to "evaluate performances on the bases of authenticity, rhythm or timing, and tonal quality or clarity" rather than "personality, showmanship, audience appeal, or special virtuosic technique" (Goertzen 355: 1996). By contrast, the Big Squeeze invites players to perform distinct styles of repertoire, has no formalized canon of pieces to learn, and no clearly articulated method of

scoring contenders. In 2015 the rules for the Big Squeeze contest stated that “Judging criteria will include: song interpretation, technical skill, originality, execution and stage presence.” These general descriptors do little to define the judging process, nor to suggest how idiosyncrasies within each style will be evaluated.

Regarding the ethnicity of the performers he observes, Goertzen writes, “Today’s fiddlers and their audiences are white and usually post-ethnic— that is, any awareness of a German, Polish, or other European national background is peripheral in a player’s public image and is not expressed in contest performances” (Goertzen 357: 1996). By contrast, the three styles in the Big Squeeze each have strong associations with specific ethnic/racial identities. In my observations, even polka contestants tend to have an interest in their Czech-German ancestry and are eager to explore and discuss its connection to the music. Musicians within competitive mariachi ensembles also associate the style with Mexican-American heritage (Neshyba 2012: 112). But, unlike the Big Squeeze, the competitive youth mariachi league— presented originally by MASBA (Mexican-American School Board Association), and since 2016 by the UIL or University Interscholastic League— judge not on the basis of individual performance, but rather group presentation, and therefore enforce notions of collectivity and shared effort (Neshyba 2012:135).

Individual, head-to-head competition can leave young musicians in an exposed position. Potential feelings of disappointment and embarrassment discourage future participation in the contest and, in extreme cases, lead to declining interest in playing the accordion. In the crowded *conjunto* category with so many excellent musicians, contestant anxieties are magnified. Ballí explains that many young Mexican-Americans seem to get involved in playing accordion as an alternative to other competitive activities, stating,

"these kids don't necessarily participate in other school events: [i.e.] UIL, sports, or other arts programs where [competition is commonplace]," (Ballí 2015). As a result, students may be hesitant to participate in the Big Squeeze. Juan Longoria Jr. notes, "A lot of my kids didn't compete because they feel that 'I couldn't compete with so and so... So, they are kind of losing their edge for it,'" implying an unease with contests and personal evaluation of any sort (Longoria Jr. 2015). The introduction of competition accentuates perceived hierarchies of talent within the conjunto community. Longoria Jr. continues, "They see it. He's [so good on the accordion that] he's like a starting point guard, a starting quarterback... And there's a second string, third string... So they back off" (Longoria Jr. 2015). Professional accordionist, music educator, and leader of the University of Texas at Austin *conjunto* ensemble Joel Guzman echoes Longoria's sports metaphor by likening a young player who goes into the Big Squeeze unprepared to a "guy who goes into a prizefight with three weeks of practice" (Guzman 2016). Guzman argues that the trauma of losing one of these competitions can be enough to discourage a student from continuing to play. In our conversations, he underscored this point by emphatically pantomiming a dejected contender taking off his accordion and throwing it to the ground.

Unfortunately, the sustainability model aggravates the impact of competition by giving Texas Folklife access to South Texas communities that are among the poorest in the United States and whose residents are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of rejection. In "The Influence of Cultural Identity and Perceived Barriers on College-Going Beliefs and Aspirations of Latino Youth in Emerging Immigrant Communities," scholars Laura Gonzalez, Gabriela Stein, and Nadia Huq stress the importance of "person-based barriers" (Gonzalez, Stein, and Huq 2013: 115) in determining students' educational

success. Person-based barriers include issues of self-esteem “such as the worry ‘what if I’m not smart enough?’” (Gonzalez, Stein, and Huq 2013: 115) By eliminating so many of its contestants, The Big Squeeze potentially threatens its contestants’ sense of self-worth and potential for self-actualization. As I discussed earlier, the contest creates multiple levels of interaction among cultural heritage managers and tradition-bearers. But Titon does not consider the possibility that collaboration can become— to borrow another term from ecology—*invasive*. Texas Folklife introduces the Big Squeeze to young players who have no chance of achieving recognition from it, raising ethical concerns about the NGO’s responsibility in such cases.

The Big Squeeze can also generate unrealistic ambitions among its winners and their families. The cash prize, press coverage, an opportunity to perform at the Accordion Kings and Queens concert, and other professional opportunities awarded can lead to unrealistic expectations. Guzman explains, “A lot of these kids and their parents think these contests are going to be their ticket out of the barrio,” adding, “I’ve had parents come up to me with their kids, the kids wearing the big belt buckle and the hat, holding the accordion, and they say, ‘we want you to make him a star.’” In “Living the Dream or Awakening from the Nightmare: Race and Athletic Identity,” authors Louis Harrison, Gary Salies, Albert Bimper, and Willy K. Rotich identify similar aspirations among young African-American men regarding athletic careers. Like entertainment in the *conjunto* community, “sport is framed as the red carpet pathway out of poverty and obscurity and into fame and fortune.” (Bimper, Harrison, Salies, and Rotich 2011: 100). They stress, “Not many Fortune 500 companies are seeking employees with running, blocking, and tackling skills.” The same could be said about technical expertise on the accordion, which makes one wonder about

the wisdom of focusing on that one aspect of musical experience. Again, the Big Squeeze contest, because of its close relationships to minority and immigrant communities, runs the risk of negatively impacting the very musical communities they intend to nurture by over-emphasizing the importance of exclusively musical skills.

Even if the negative social impact of competition could somehow be negated, it still remains unclear how to appropriately rank *conjunto* musicians for prizes, given the music's strong links to notions of communality and solidarity. In his now-classic interpretation and history of Texas-Mexican *conjunto*, Manuel Peña identifies the genre as "an example of defensive, counter-ideological, symbolic expression" (Peña 1985:151) for working-class Tejanos in response to pressures to assimilate to American culture. Even today, the style has an uneasy relationship to the mainstream music industry and the idea of socially elevated performer-stars. Peña writes, "Among conjunto musicians there have never been 'stars' in the mass industry sense, whose marketability is promoted by keeping them away from the public and turning them into objects of fantasy and glamour" (Peña 1985: 152). Paraphrasing a statement by Tim Patterson about American country music, Peña concludes that, for *conjunto*, "historically there has been no sharp dividing line between performer and audience." How, then, does the Big Squeeze resolve *conjunto*'s counterhegemonic resonances within a tournament format based on a system of exceptionalism? Cristina Ballí acknowledges the tension, remarking that "in the whole field of *conjunto*, there haven't really been many competitions" (Ballí 2015). She adds, "There used to be, back in the 50's and 60's. They were called *los aficionados*" [amateur nights]. Ballí describes how these radio-sponsored concerts would feature Texas-Mexican performers, selecting a winner on the basis of audience applause. The *aficianados* model of evaluation, in which the

community selects the winner or finalist, appears on the surface to be a better fit with *conjunto*'s co-operative, working-class ethos, rather than the current model involving judges who are not necessarily from the community. But one can easily imagine such an event becoming adversarial even so, with young players vying for recognition and potential rejection becoming, if anything, more intense because it derives from the contestant's own community. Nevertheless, a common complaint of the Big Squeeze is that scoring criteria are disconnected from the communities participating in the contest. This concern, at least, would be addressed in a shift to a community-based form of evaluation.

The Big Squeeze currently uses a three-judge system to select finalists and winners that currently does not account for regional stylistic variances. The judges do not travel to the auditions but, rather, watch videos of the contestants to select finalists. Once the finalists are selected, they are invited to perform at The Big Squeeze finals in Austin. There, the judges pick champions from each of the three accordion styles. In 2015, judges consisted of community organizer and *conjunto* musician Juan Tejada, *conjunto* accordionist/ singer Eva Ybarra, and accordionist Charles Thibodeaux. Although Tejada and Ybarra are revered figures in the *conjunto* community, they both come from the San Antonio scene, which tends to emphasize notions of tradition and history within youth music programs (i.e. Conjunto *Heritage Taller*⁸). In my experience, South Texas *conjunto* performers tend to be more heavily influenced by *música nortena* and Mexican popular music in general, and as a result are more likely to consider the ability to play in multiple styles, showmanship, and visual presentation key aspects of their performance. Thus, they

⁸ Conjunto Heritage Taller. "Conjunto Heritage Taller," *Conjunto Heritage Taller*. <https://conjuntoheritagetaller.com/> (accessed May 5, 2016).

may valorize stylistic elements that San Antonio-based judges care little about. Regarding the contestant who played the accordion behind his back, Longoria Jr. emphasized to me the difficulty of what the student had done and also how his not being accepted into the finals proved highly frustrating for the student and the entire ensemble. He added "when you mix music with competition, there are going to be some different opinions, and that's where it gets real iffy" (Longoria Jr. 2015). Texas Folklife is left with the unenviable task of creating one rubric for assessing excellence across three different forms of musical expression, whose styles of performance themselves vary by region.

THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY

So far my essay has focused mostly on the *conjunto* community, primarily because it dominates the contest demographically and because the networks of *conjunto* performers within the Texas-Mexican community provide an established context for Texas Folklife's participation in sustainable cultural heritage management. But precisely because of the strength of the *conjunto* scene relative to the polka and Cajun/zydeco communities, applications of Titon's "diversity" principle become complicated. In the Big Squeeze, Texas Folklife must address the varied needs of multiple musical communities in one tournament setting, suggesting a need to refine the definition and possible implementations of the notion of diversity.

As mentioned earlier, in 2014 the Big Squeeze moved to a three-category format to allow Cajun/zydeco and German/Czech polka players increased exposure by competing among themselves. The number of polka and Cajun/zydeco contestants increased, but remained small in comparison to *conjunto* performers. There is also a noticeable difference

between the overall level of skill level between *conjunto* players and European-style polka and zydeco players, most likely attributable to the smaller pool of applicants and lack of established mentorship networks. On a pragmatic level, balancing three different styles within the same event is musically challenging, as the band backing *conjunto* contestants tends to double as a polka group and sometimes will even perform Cajun/zydeco. In this instance, Titon's call for "diversity" is not well served, in that the needs of one community are elided with or eclipsed by those of another. As I have argued, it is debatable whether the *conjunto* community benefits from the Big Squeeze, but the scene clearly has no lack of talent, resources, or community engagement, and therefore is well suited to large-scale public presentations of their music. Zydeco and (particularly) polka, on the other hand, appear to be in need of a different type of support. To its credit, Texas Folklife has attempted to intervene in the disappearance of Czech-German polka in Texas. In 2013 the organization held a Texas Polka Symposium and Festival in Schulenburg to brainstorm about how to generate greater interest in the fading tradition. Margolies and Ballí gave presentations on cultural sustainability and advocated the implementation of school programs for polka, much in the same vein as the conjunto ensembles in southern Texas high schools.

The lack of Cajun/zydeco contestants is a less dire problem, as larger numbers of performers compete in that category each year. The biggest issue for that group in Texas appears to be that the zydeco community exists on the periphery of the much more substantial Louisiana scene. Therefore, a large portion of zydeco players are not eligible to participate in the event because of its statewide focus. Nevertheless, neither Texas nor

Louisiana has the type of zydeco mentorship network that one sees in South Texas schools and organizations such as Conjunto Heritage Taller.

In 2016 Texas Folklife reinitiated an apprenticeship program that provides small grants to traditional master artists and helps them cover the cost of teaching one or more students. The initiative was largely inspired by a desire to stimulate greater instruction in European-style polka and zydeco. In its focus on apprenticeships and the organization of related symposia, Texas Folklife appears to acknowledge the limits of the Big Squeeze as a form of sustainable heritage management. I argue that the organization needs to reimagine the Big Squeeze itself as well in order to serve its partnering communities in the best way possible. First, Texas Folklife must reevaluate the importance of the tournament model. As a framework, what benefits accrue from such competition? Obviously, it creates suspense and drama for audience members, media, and aspiring contestants. The State of Texas in particular seems to support statewide competitions, as evidenced by the existence of a variety of them that showcase fiddling, mariachi music, marching bands, choirs, and other musical styles. To borrow a phrase from the 1970s film *Patton*, Texans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Competition also provides champions media exposure and can lead to new performance opportunities, as mentioned. But is this enough? Below, I provide several suggestions for enhancing Big Squeeze's capability to fulfill the role of steward for traditional music.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGES TO THE BIG SQUEEZE

If the competitive format of the Big Squeeze event cannot be discarded, organizers should change the judging process by revising the evaluation rubric, creating space for

greater community input and making sure that judges' expectations are communicated to participants. Judges should evaluate each style differently in accordance with the aesthetic expectations of the communities from which it derives. Master musicians and community leaders from various regions should help develop such criteria in order to reach broad consensus about the rubric for each style. Involving the community in the evaluation process would increase interconnectivity, strengthening the sustainability effort. At the semi-finalist level, I suggest that a student from each showcase be selected for the finals and that the community help make this decision, whether through a write-in vote or perhaps by electing community leaders as judges. Hopefully, this would decrease feelings of alienation and resentment resulting from the current methods of evaluation.

I would recommend that the organization abandon the tournament format altogether. For the past few years, Texas Folklife has downplayed the competitive element of its contests, referring to them as "showcases." One could easily envision the events becoming true showcases: that is, simply a venue for young players to publicly display their abilities. In such a format, the Big Squeeze would deemphasize ranking the achievement of participants in relation to their peers. Instead, it would allow for what HL Ruben calls *autocomping*, "a pattern of competition which substitutes an internal for an external standard of appraisal, and in which the competitor is actually pitted against himself or herself" (Cited in Gallops 2005: 19). Joel Guzman supports the theme of *autocomping*, suggesting that arts promoters should support the idea of "music as life skill," and orient music making not toward the attainment of technical excellence but rather toward the development of broader skills such as discipline, collaboration, and improvisation. If a prize must be given in *conjunto* shows, Guzman suggests rewarding a student who most

clearly demonstrates the importance of music in his or her daily life, be it through a speech, video, a song composition, written essay, or some other format. Here musical performance would not be the focus but rather how music enriches and shapes an individual's lived experience.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception in 2007, the Big Squeeze Youth Accordion contest has been in dialogue with the sustainability model outlined by Jeff Todd Titon. The decision to seek out accordionists in collaboration with grassroots organizers has led to more robust competitions and has generated additional media interest in traditional arts. Texas Folklife has also established strong bonds with working-class communities, bonds that require the organization to operate with a high level of sensitivity regarding its programming.

Smaller Texas music communities such as those performing zydeco and German/Czech polka seem to require a different type of traditional arts intervention. Beyond heightened media coverage for such music, there is little evidence to suggest that the Big Squeeze does anything to generate the type of infrastructure that would allow for disappearing musical expressions to thrive. To that end, Big Squeeze organizers have taken steps through community symposia and apprenticeship programs to encourage communities to embrace the music and encouraging people to play it.

I have discussed suggestions for improving the program above, all of which could be applied to other music initiatives involving working-class or minority communities. Ideally, organizers would avoid a competition structure, though I realize that the need to create "buzz" within the community and in media outlets might make this impossible to

avoid. If judging does take place, organizers should create a system in collaboration with local musicians and community leaders, as noted. If the contest draws participants from multiple regions, I believe it is important that performers from each region are represented in semi-final or final events as a way of encouraging diversity and connectedness.

My intention is not to dismiss Titon's sustainability model, but rather to assess how sustainability functions in practice and to offer recommendations about how to improve its implementation. Principles of diversity, limits to growth, connectedness, and stewardship provide a solid foundation for cultural heritage management, but each style of music and each community present unique challenges that individuals must grapple with on their own terms, which may require modifications to the model. The example of the Big Squeeze shows how such principles conflict with each other at times. Connectedness to working-class communities (i.e., event collaborations between local musicians, businesses, community members, and Texas Folklife), for instance, may lead to conflicts over the nature of stewardship (in this case, the creation of a statewide accordion contest/showcase, disputes over judging criteria), as the tournament creates frustration and anxiety among many of its young players. With its focus on collaboration and the decentering of top-down institutional structures, Titon's conception of musical sustainability does not always prove compatible with the unavoidably uneven power relations between NGO's —the gatekeepers of funding, sponsorship, and promotional opportunities— and the individuals who increasingly rely on them for such resources. The collaborative yet uneven nature of sustainability endeavors requires that NGOs assume an extraordinary level of responsibility for the specific needs of each community, taking extra care to manage the "cultural soil." Therefore, I advocate for a form of musical sustainability that addresses not

only the potential for cooperation between cultural workers and communities but also acknowledges that a community's reliance on NGO's to navigate circuits of commerce, promotion, and event organization removes any possibility of truly egalitarian exchange.

Because of the discourse's roots in ecology, cultural sustainability tends to treat culture as a biological phenomenon at the expense of any socio-structural considerations. The approach is appealing in that it naturalizes culture, turns it into an object beyond discourse and dispute, a resource that is as easily cultivated and maintained as a garden of roses. Titon relies heavily on metaphors of nature in his writings, often referring to musical communities as "ecosystems," with little to no consideration of issues such as class, race, and gender that obviously influence performance dynamics. In *Reflections of a Cultural Broker*, Richard Kurin, former director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, questions whether the social sciences are still contributing in meaningful ways to public policy and discourse (Kurin 1997). I argue that cultural heritage managers would benefit from incorporating lessons from post-colonial and post-structural scholarship in the social sciences. Such literature foregrounds a greater awareness of positionality, the partiality of utterances, the need to divulge one's power dynamics, and the incorporation of a variety of voices (Clifford 1986). Power dynamics in heritage efforts are unavoidable, especially in the current political climate, in which culture is increasingly viewed as a resource to be deployed (Yúdice 2003). Cultural workers can, however, engage in fruitful collaborations with tradition-bearers and their communities, provided they acknowledge that musical practice is a perpetually contested, negotiated, and reimagined field of human interest, and that actors seek to fulfill diverging needs and desires from a variety of historically, socially, and economically constituted positions.

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